

Democratic Like Us? Political Orientation and the Effect of Making Democracy Salient on Anti-Israel Attitude

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Abstract

Israel is viewed unfavorably among wide segments of the public within several European democracies, despite being regarded itself as a Western democracy. Does drawing attention to Israel's democratic attributes improve views toward Israel? In two surveys with Dutch national samples, anti-Semitic affect, low anti-Arab/Muslim affect, and left-wing political orientation independently predicted anti-Israel sentiment. However, in experiments embedded within the surveys, making salient Israel's democratic attributes had opposite effects on Israel attitude across those on the right and the left – slightly decreasing anti-Israel sentiment among those with a right-wing orientation but slightly increasing anti-Israel sentiment among those with a left-wing orientation. We discuss potential explanations grounded in social psychological theory as well as implications for the strategic communication efforts of groups seeking to influence attitudes toward Israel.

Keywords: Ideology, anti-Semitism, political attitudes, Israel, prejudice.

Israel has long been the subject of worldwide attention. In many European democracies Israel is viewed unfavorably, often in connection with its policies toward the Palestinians and its aggressive posture in regional affairs (e.g. BBC 2012). The way in which third parties view other societies has social importance, but negativity toward Israel among Europeans would seem to be of special interest for at least two reasons. One is that anti-Semitism, historically pervasive and horrifyingly consequential in Europe, might contribute to anti-Israel sentiment. Another is that Israel, almost uniquely among disfavored nations, is characterized by Western democratic political institutions and civil liberties.

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Though this latter consideration has been invoked by those advocating for Israel, its impact on attitude toward Israel has not been explored. In particular, we are aware of no prior experiments testing the influence of highlighting Israeli democracy on attitude toward Israel. In the present research, we explore how emphasis on Israeli democracy impacts views of Israel among different types of people. We predict that the influence of democracy salience varies on the basis of political orientation. We test this hypothesis in two studies employing experimental manipulations embedded within surveys of Dutch national samples.

WHO OPPOSES ISRAEL?

We first consider background characteristics that might impact attitude toward Israel. First, Israel's supporters commonly argue that the special ire so often reserved for Israel is indicative of anti-Semitism (e.g. Lewis 2006). Indeed, survey and experimental research do suggest some degree of psychological linkage between views of Jews and views of Israel (e.g. Cohen et al. 2009; 2011; Kaplan and Small 2006), although this research does not demonstrate that anti-Semitism is a cause of anti-Israel sentiment. But attitudes toward groups involved in conflicts are an important predictor of attitudes about those conflicts (Berinsky 2009), which would suggest that not only attitudes toward Jews, but also attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims, would predict views of Israel. Indeed dislike of the latter appears to be quite prominent in the contemporary Western world (e.g. Pew Research Center 2014; Strabac and Listhaug 2008). We therefore, hypothesize that negativity toward Jews will positively predict, and that negativity toward Arabs and Muslims will negatively predict, anti-Israel sentiment.

Individuals who identify with the left are relatively concerned about mistreatment of socially disfavored groups (e.g. Muslims) and supportive of promoting equality among groups (e.g. Feldman 1988; Jost et al. 2008). Moreover, elites associated with the political left are nowadays more inclined to oppose Israeli policy and highlight Israeli militarism and mistreatment of Palestinians (e.g. Harrison, 2006), thereby providing anti-Israel cues to their supporters. Thus, we expect left-wing orientation to be associated with anti-Israel sentiment.

THE EFFECT OF DEMOCRACY SALIENCE

Our main goal is to test the impact of democracy salience on anti-Israel sentiment. Israel supporters often accuse those critical of Israel of hypocrisy, because the latter, they claim, ignore much worse human rights violations by other nations.¹ Pro-Israel

¹To give one of many examples, following passage of resolutions condemning Israel by the UN Human Rights Council in 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remarked that, "In many countries the free media are closed down and the UN Human Rights Council decided to condemn Israel. It's

public relations efforts often emphasize that Israel's democratic attributes are unique among Middle Eastern nations.²

Prior research provides some reason to expect that these efforts will improve views of Israel. For one thing, democratic governance is viewed favorably around the world (e.g. Diamond 2008), so attaching the democratic label to a country might improve evaluations. Second, conveying to a Western democratic public that Israel is similarly democratic might lead to consideration of Israel as a member of a broad ingroup of Westerners who share basic political and social values. This might in turn trigger ingroup favoritism (Tajfel and Turner 1979), yielding more favorable evaluations of Israel.

But there is reason to expect that democracy salience will influence Israel attitudes differently across different kinds of people. In particular, those on the political right are more inclined to view national traditions in an unambiguously positive way (Huddy and Khatib 2007) and to value group cohesion and conformity (e.g. Feldman 1988; Graham et al. 2009). Thinking of Israel as democratic might particularly enhance motivation to favorably judge Israel among Westerners most committed to viewing their nations' democratic political traditions with uncritical positivity.

Related to this, highlighting Israel's democratic status might activate a set of pro-Israel considerations among Europeans with allegiances to right-wing political parties. As noted above, favorable communications about Israel frequently employ frames of Israel that emphasize its democratic attributes. Frames and cues can exert an important influence on political attitudes (e.g. Berinsky 2009; Chong and Druckman 2007), and over the last several years, pro-Israel messages and their accompanying frames have been embraced by right-wing European parties who seem to "find that support for Israel dovetails nicely with an anti-Islam platform" (Theil 2011). For partisans of the right, the pro-Israel arguments in circulation might be tied to emphasis on Israeli democracy, in contradistinction to the political systems of neighboring Muslim countries. For these reasons, we predict that emphasis on democracy will produce more of a positive attitude toward Israel among those on the right.

But while democracy salience might improve views of Israel among those on the right, there are reasons to predict that it might harden views toward Israel among those on the left. Those on the political left are inclined to recognize unfavorable aspects of Western political traditions and to recognize failures of Western democracies to live up to their ideals (e.g. Huddy and Khatib 2007; Sibley

absurd. This procession of hypocrisy goes on and we shall continue to denounce and expose it" (Tait 2014).

²In a 2013 speech, for example, Netanyahu described Israel as an "island of democracy" in the Middle East and stated that "those who seek liberty are our natural allies" (Keinon 2013). Israeli public diplomacy, referred to with the Hebrew term *hasbara* (meaning "explaining"), frequently invokes Israel's democratic attributes, as do U.S.-based pro-Israel political groups.

et al. 2008). Bringing up Israeli democracy might activate considerations relevant to this worldview among those on the left, leading them to focus on what they perceive as Israeli failures to live up to democratic ideals. Such a finding would be consistent with the “black sheep effect” (e.g. Marques et al. 1988), in which ingroup members who violate a group-relevant norm are judged more harshly than are outgroup members who violate the same norm. Furthermore, emphasis on Israeli democracy might induce a sense that Israel and its (often right-wing) defenders trumpet Israel’s democratic status in a cynical attempt to distract attention from its violations of democratic ideals. For these types of reasons, we predict that democracy salience will worsen views of Israel among those on the left.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Using experiments embedded within surveys of two Dutch national samples we pursued two research goals. The first was to test whether high anti-Semitic affect, low anti-Arab and anti-Muslim affect, and left-wing political orientation independently predict anti-Israel sentiment. The second, and primary, goal was to examine the impact on anti-Israel attitude of making salient Israel’s democratic status, and whether this influence differs as a function of political orientation.

METHOD

Participants

Nine-hundred eleven (911) respondents from a Dutch online panel comprised Sample 1 and 663 respondents from a Dutch online panel comprised Sample 2. These were not probability samples, but they were constructed to mirror the Dutch population on basic demographic characteristics (See Supplementary Materials, Part A).

Procedure and Measures

All measures were coded to range from 0.00 to 1.00. Measurement information and experimental stimulus wording are presented in Supplementary Materials, Part B.

Background measures

In both samples, anti-Semitic affect and anti-Arab/Muslim affect were measured with ratings of how much one likes vs. dislikes the relevant groups. High scores correspond with dislike. Within Sample 1 the political orientation measure was formed on the basis of reported party preference, and within Sample 2 respondents directly rated their political orientation on an 11-point right-left scale. In both samples, high score corresponds with right-wing orientation.

Experimental manipulation of democracy salience

After completing the background measures, respondents in both samples were told that they would read information about a randomly selected country from the Middle East. All respondents actually read about Israel, but were randomly assigned to different experimental conditions.

In Sample 1, there were three conditions. The *Democratic Similarity* condition emphasized that Israel is similar to the Netherlands in terms of being a democracy whereas the *Control* condition instead discussed Israel's agricultural and industrial sectors. In order to untangle the effects of democratic similarity from general or cultural similarity, we also included a *Cultural Similarity* condition that emphasized non-political cultural similarities between Israel and the Netherlands.

In Sample 2, there were two conditions. The text of the *Control* condition was identical to that of Study 1. For the *Democracy Salience* condition, the text highlighted Israeli democracy without mentioning similarity with the Netherlands.

After reading the text, Sample 1 respondents completed two manipulation check items, in which they rated perceptions of Israel's cultural similarity and political similarity with the Netherlands.³

Anti-Israel attitude

After the manipulation check items, respondents in both samples completed four items from which the measure of Anti-Israel Attitude was computed.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

Within Sample 1, the manipulations had the expected effects on perceptions of similarity (see Supplementary Materials, Part C).

Effects of Background Characteristics on Anti-Israel Sentiment

To test the effects of anti-Semitic affect, anti-Arab/Muslim affect, and Political Orientation on anti-Israel Attitude within Sample 1, we simultaneously regressed the latter on the three background variables as well as demographic variables (see Column 1, Table 1). This model pools subjects across conditions. Within Sample 2, we conducted a parallel analysis which included additional dummy coded variables representing respondents' religious affiliation (see Column 1, Table 2).

³The first 83 respondents received an incorrectly worded version of the manipulation check items, but subsequent analyses revealed that this did not impact the pattern of findings reported here. These respondents were excluded from the manipulation check analyses.

Table 1
Study 1: OLS Models Predicting Anti-Israel Beliefs

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.48** (0.03)	0.50** (0.03)	0.48** (0.03)
Anti-Semitic affect	0.20** (0.03)	0.20** (0.03)	0.20** (0.03)
Anti-Muslim affect	-0.12** (0.02)	-0.12** (0.02)	-0.12** (0.02)
Political orientation (high = right wing)	-0.06** (0.01)	-0.06** (0.01)	-0.04 (0.03)
Age	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
University education	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Vocational education	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Sex (high = female)	0.02+ (0.01)	0.02+ (0.01)	0.02+ (0.01)
Cultural condition		-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)
Political condition		-0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)
Political orientation \times cultural condition			-0.01 (0.03)
Political orientation \times political condition			-0.07* (0.04)
R^2	0.11	0.11	0.12
Num. obs.	911	911	911

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients with all variables coded to range from 0 to 1, and standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

Within both samples, anti-Semitic affect had the largest effect of the three background characteristics (Sample 1: $b = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$; Sample 2: $b = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$), and both anti-Arab/Muslim affect (Sample 1: $b = -0.12$, $p < 0.001$; Sample 2: $b = -0.05$, $p < 0.10$) and (right-wing) Political Orientation ($b = -0.06$, $p < 0.001$; $b = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$) predicted less opposition to Israel.

Effects of Democratic Similarity Salience on Anti-Israel Attitude

We assessed the effects of the treatment variables on Anti-Israel Attitude in Sample 1 by adding two dummy coded variables to the regression equation: Political Similarity Condition vs. all and Cultural Similarity Condition vs. all (making the Control condition the omitted category). In Sample 2, we added a dummy coded variable to the equation in which 1 = Democracy condition and 0 = Control condition. None of the treatment condition dummies had a significant main effect.

Table 2
Study 2: OLS Models Predicting Anti-Israel Beliefs

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.51** (0.04)	0.50** (0.04)	0.46** (0.04)
Anti-Semitic affect	0.16** (0.03)	0.15** (0.03)	0.16** (0.03)
Anti-Arab/Muslim affect	-0.05+ (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.05+ (0.03)
Political orientation (high = right wing)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.01 (0.05)
Age	0.03+ (0.01)	0.03+ (0.01)	0.03+ (0.01)
University education	-0.10** (0.04)	-0.10** (0.04)	-0.10** (0.04)
Vocational education	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Sex (high = female)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Jewish	-0.34* (0.15)	-0.34* (0.15)	-0.32* (0.15)
Muslim	0.25** (0.06)	0.25** (0.06)	0.25** (0.06)
No religion	0.03+ (0.02)	0.03+ (0.02)	0.03+ (0.02)
Other religion	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.07)
Democracy vs. Control condition		0.02 (0.01)	0.09* (0.04)
Political orientation \times condition			-0.13+ (0.07)
R^2	0.12	0.13	0.13
Num. obs.	663	663	663

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients with all variables coded to range from 0 to 1, and standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

However, democracy salience was expected to differentially impact anti-Israel views across those on the right and the left of the political spectrum. To test this hypothesis in Sample 1 we added to the equation the interactions between Political Orientation and each of the two experimental dummy variables. As displayed in column 3 of Table 1, Political Orientation significantly moderated the effect of the Political Condition dummy on anti-Israel Attitude ($b = -0.07$, $p < 0.05$) but did not significantly moderate the effect of the Cultural Condition dummy on anti-Israel Attitude ($b = -0.01$, ns). The interaction effect and confidence intervals are plotted in Figure 1. As displayed, across the Control and Cultural Similarity conditions, the effects of right vs. left political orientation on anti-Israel Attitude are of a similar magnitude, with those on the right being less opposed to Israel. However, in the Political Similarity condition, making democracy salient resulted in slightly

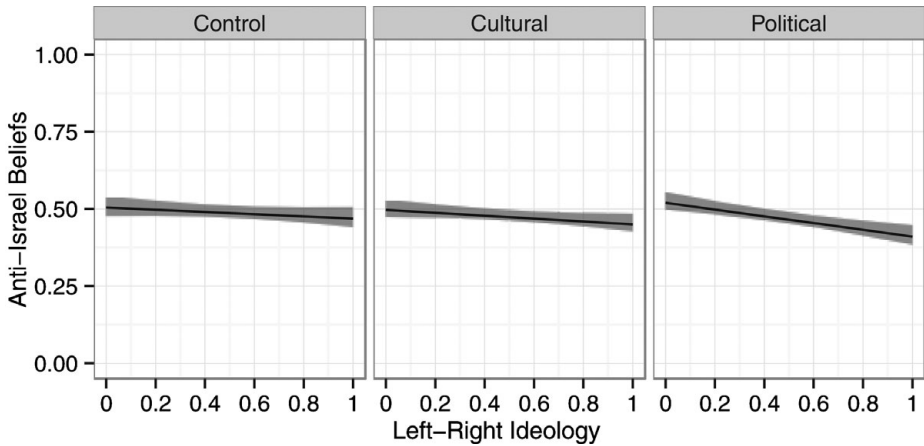


Figure 1

Sample 1: Fitted Effects and 95 Percent Confidence Intervals of Left-Right Ideology on Anti-Israel Beliefs by Condition.

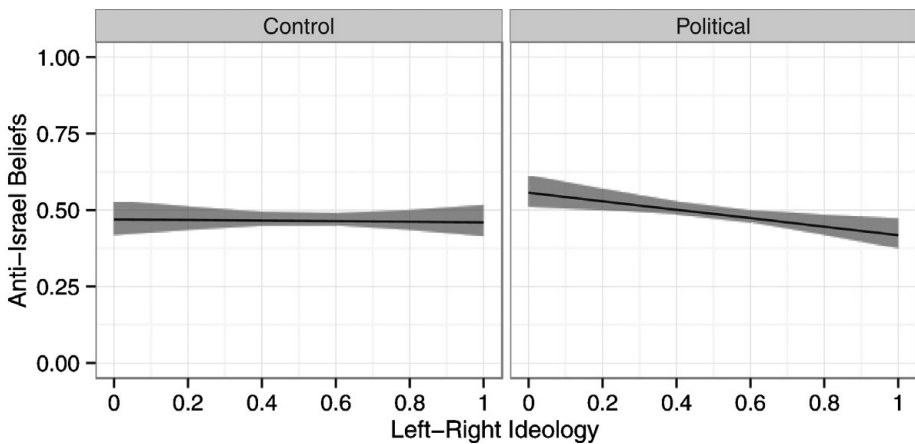


Figure 2

Sample 2: Fitted Effects and 95 Percent Confidence Intervals of Left-Right Ideology on Anti-Israel Beliefs by Condition.

increased anti-Israel sentiment among those on the left but slightly decreased anti-Israel sentiment among those on the right.

Within Sample 2, we added to the equation the political orientation X treatment condition interaction term. As displayed in column 3 of Table 2, Political Orientation near-significantly moderated the effect of treatment condition on anti-Israel Attitude ($b = -0.13, p = 0.06$). The interaction effect and confidence intervals are plotted in Figure 2. As displayed, right-wing and left-wing respondents did not differ on anti-Israel Attitude in the Control condition but democracy salience tended

to make left-wingers slightly more negative, and right-wingers slightly more positive, toward Israel.

DISCUSSION

The present studies investigated potential antecedents of anti-Israel sentiment and the impact of making salient Israel's democratic status on views about Israel. Anti-Semitic affect, left-wing political orientation, and low anti-Arab/Muslim affect independently predicted anti-Israel sentiment. Furthermore, making democracy salient resulted in increased anti-Israel sentiment among those on the political left but decreased anti-Israel sentiment among those on the right.

In addition to testing the replicability of these findings, future research should also investigate their generalizability to other national populations. The theoretical basis of this research might be thought to apply to other Western democratic publics. Across many societies, those on the political right tend toward conformity and group cohesion, and those on the left are more concerned with mistreatment of outgroups and are less deferential to their own societies' traditions (e.g. Graham et al. 2009; Jost et al. 2008). Furthermore, Israel attitudes have become the subject of partisan and ideological division across many Western societies (e.g. Pew Research Center 2009), with democracy frequently invoked among those supporting Israel. But differences in national perspectives on Middle East conflicts might result in different patterns of results across Western nations. For example, the United States does not wrestle with the same history of anti-Semitism as does Europe, and has historically been positive toward Israel (Pew Research Center 2009). Meanwhile, European countries themselves vary in attitudes toward Jews and Israel (Anti-Defamation League 2012).

In addition, future research should investigate the precise causal mechanisms involved in the processes studied here. As we have suggested, ingroup favoritism, ideological differences in valuing of conformity and ingroup cohesion, and evocations of partisan and ideological cues and frames might be relevant to the processes through which democracy salience impacts attitudes toward Israel. We hope that future research will systematically explore these and other possibilities.

In conclusion, our main findings suggest that democracy salience can widen ideological differences over Israel. This would imply that those seeking to influence attitude toward Israel (positively or negatively) should reconsider raising Israel's democratic status in their arguments. The gains in support among the right might be counterbalanced by reductions in support among the left. However, those who seek to generate domestic ideological polarization on the Israel issue might be well served by emphasizing Israel's democratic similarity to Western nations.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2015.13>

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